

**Statement of Chairman Tom Davis**  
**Government Reform Committee Hearing**  
**“School Choice in the District of Columbia: Opening Doors Parents and Students”**  
**June 24, 2003**

The condition of District of Columbia Public Schools has concerned me since I first came to Congress and became Chairman of the District of Columbia Subcommittee. While we’ve made strides since then—the D.C. College Access Act and the establishment of charter schools, for example—the condition, quality, and improvement of the educational opportunities in the nation’s capital should remain a constant concern for all of us.

In 1995, Congress enacted “The District of Columbia School Reform Act”, which set up the framework for the District to make major progress in selected areas of education reform. About eight years have passed since enactment of this legislation. Unfortunately, DCPS has not dramatically improved.

We’re not here to disparage the District’s school system. We’re here to lend a helping hand to students who are stuck in under-performing schools. Too many students are leaving third grade unable to read. These are children who will never have another shot at third grade.

In 1999, Congress passed the D.C. College Access Act, legislation I authored that has helped defray tuition expenses for District of Columbia high school graduates who seek higher education. It has leveled the playing field and brightened the futures of thousands of young adults. But now we need to reach more students, and reach them earlier. We cannot optimize the impact of the College Access Act if we’re unable to succeed at the elementary and secondary levels.

The current condition of D.C. public schools can leave a child isolated and discouraged. Before students become disenchanted, before they forever forget the joy of learning, we need to provide every opportunity to keep them engaged.

How can we expect students to dream of higher education if their experience in the lower grades is fraught with disappointment, with violence, with low expectations? We cannot.

The ability of D.C. schools to meet its core goals has long been challenged by financial mismanagement and an array of other issues. Current efforts to improve academic performance have not yielded tangible results. Poor academic achievement scores are one clear indicator. Many students lack basic language and math skills. Standardized reading and math test scores remain stagnant. The average D.C. SAT score is 799 while the national average is 1,020. The drop out rate is about 40 percent. The physical condition of many schools is unacceptable.

Between the 1997-98 school year and the 2000-2001 school year, the number of assaults with deadly weapons in DC public schools jumped from 66 to 127. The number of simple assaults increased from 384 to 475. The number of students bringing concealed weapons to school increased from 329 to 423. The number of threats against students and staff members increased from 156 to 225. How can we look parents in the eye and say that this is the best we can do for their children?

These are schools that few of us on this committee would send our own children to -- and that few if any members of the D.C. Council would send their children to. How on earth can we require low-income families in the District to do something we ourselves would not do?

The goal of school choice in the District of Columbia is addition, not subtraction. With choice we hope to lift all boats. The scholarships we envision will be a boon to public and charter schools as well.

There is no one here today who does not want the District's education system to improve. I've come to the conclusion that parents and students who are stuck in under-performing schools need—no, have the right—to choose from a wider pool. I have received calls from parents who are frustrated, angry, even emotionally distraught by the condition of their child's school. It's time to do more than sympathize. This is a moral imperative.

Low-income families concerned about quality and safety in public schools should be allowed the choice to send their children elsewhere. A parent should not have to send a child to a school that continually lets them down, day after day, year after year. I've met with a number of D.C. parents over recent weeks who are asking for relief, for hope, for choice. The legislation Chairman Boehner and I introduced yesterday responds to their pleas.

The school choice debate should not be about politics. It should be about an honest appraisal of the state of affairs in our public schools, about offering an

alternative for students and parent who want a fair share of opportunities. What is being proposed is not a mandate but a choice. We began down this road of expanded choice when we approved charter schools in the District. But while charter schools are good, they are not good enough – not yet anyway. As The Washington Post reported last week, there is not yet any evidence that the District's charter schools are doing a better academic job than their DCPS peers.

Some are making a mountain out of a molehill over the fact that this legislation authorizes funding for school choice, but not enhanced funding for D.C. public schools or charter schools. The reason for this is simple: this bill deals with authorization for a new and historic program. Authorization for spending on D.C. public schools and charter schools already exists; the debate will be over how high that spending should be.

Reforming and improving education in the District of Columbia will require a multi-faceted approach, to be sure. School choice is not the panacea; it's just a critical part of the answer, and the specific focus of this hearing and this legislation. But let me state for the record that I am committed to working with the mayor, the council, the Administration and members of Congress to reaffirm our commitment to public and charter schools in the nation's capital. That's just not the issue we're tackling today.

With this legislation, we are not turning our back on the District's public education system. We are nurturing it, bolstering it, giving it the encouraging push we all agree it needs. D.C. parents are asking for our help, and we'd be wrong to not at least discuss giving it to them.

We need to pause for a moment to take note of the historic nature of our hearing today. We have two Republican full Committee chairmen in agreement with the Democrat mayor of the District of Columbia over the best course of action for District of Columbia schools. We've already come a long, long way.

I also want to recognize other members who have been instrumental in bringing this important issue to the forefront, including Congressman Jeff Flake, who testified at an earlier committee hearing on school choice; and the members who have co-sponsored the Davis-Boehner legislation. I appreciate the support of Representatives Christopher Shays, John Carter, Adam Putnam, Dave Weldon, William O. Lipinski, Joe Wilson, Vernon Ehlers, Jim DeMint, and Roger Wicker.